

Prospects for Development of Ecotourism in Bodoland Territorial Area District

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Abstract: Ecotourism refers to tourism in which the local people are significant stakeholders and gives immense importance to conservation of the available tourism resources. With the advancement of science and technology, the world has shrunk and simultaneously, the population has expanded like never before. More and more people are touring the world for leisure and other activities. This has put a huge pressure on the natural resources all over the world. Looking into this challenge, the world has come up with the concept of ecotourism. In India also this concept of tourism is gaining momentum with industrially backward and rural areas, rich in natural resources like forests, wildlife and rivers, such as in the BTAD (Bodoland Territorial Area Districts), having much scope to attract the tourists. But these natural resources are very much exploited through activities like deforestation, habitat destruction and hunting of different endemic species. Also the nature inspired rich and vibrant culture has not yet been explored adequately. This paper attempts to throw light on the various issues related to ecotourism in the region by understanding the available resources, the perceptions of local people to involve them in the tourism development programs and the tourists by interacting with them. The bottlenecks of the development of tourism here have also been chalked out to facilitate plans for ecotourism development with its effective execution to bring about all round development here with sustainability.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Stakeholders, resources, conservation, sustainability, Bodoland, development.

Introduction to ecotourism

Ecotourism refers to nature based tourism with the issue of conservation involving the local people. Ecotourism basically gained momentum since the 1990s. However, tourism existed in all ages. In ancient times tourism was an activity peaceful and based on adventure, religion, trade, war etc. But, it did not have economic significance. With the dawn of industrial society, tourism touched a new role, i.e., an economic role. People showed more interests and eagerness to see other lands, spend their hard earned money in foreign land adding to the prosperity of the host nation. However, when numbers grew, from hundreds to thousands and from thousands to millions, it raised alarm and voices were raised against the crowded places, destruction of environment in the jungles and national parks. Importantly, Protest was not against tourism but against the destruction of environment. These loud protests and efforts by the environmentalists gained some success for the movements of green tourism, ecotourism or sustainable tourism leading to the Rio de Janeiro summit. The year 2002 was declared by the United Nations as the year of Ecotourism. The purpose was to create awareness of the need for conservation and sustainable development. Consequently, meeting seminars and conferences were held all over the world to propagate the ideals of ecotourism.

Ecotourism is thus, actually a tool for conservation which involves more than conservation. It is a form of travel which responds

to region's ecological, social and economic needs (Seth, 2008). The International Eco-tourism Society defines ecotourism in the following words 'purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environments, taking care not to alter the integrity of the eco-system, while producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people.' Megan Epler Wood has put forward some components of ecotourism. This are-

1. Contributes to conservation of biodiversity
2. Sustains the wellbeing of local people
3. Includes an interpretation / learning experience
4. Involves responsible action on part of the tourism industry
5. Is delivered primarily to small groups by small scale businesses
6. Requires lowest possible consumption of non- renewable resources
7. Stresses local participation, ownership and business opportunities, particularly for rural people.

As the components of ecotourism concentrates on nature, its conservation with local participation of the rural people thus touches their culture too, this concept has conducive environment in the BTAD to grow and flourish

which is a lush green area, rich in flora and fauna, beautiful scenery with most of the people under rural category having, nature inspired vibrant culture.

About Bodoland territorial Area Districts:

Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts, (BTAD) is an autonomous region located on the north bank of Brahmaputra river in Assam in the North-East India, along the foothills of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh. It covers an area of 8821.68 Sq. Km., consisting of four contiguous districts —

Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa and Udalguri which accounts for 11.24% of the land area of the state (fig.1). The BTAD is inhabited predominantly by Bodo language speaking ethnic group. Besides, Bengalis, Assamese, Rabha, Rajbongshi, Garo, and other indigenous Mongoloid tribes are also found here. The Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) is administered by the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) which is a territorial privilege established according to the Memorandum of Settlement of February 10, 2003.

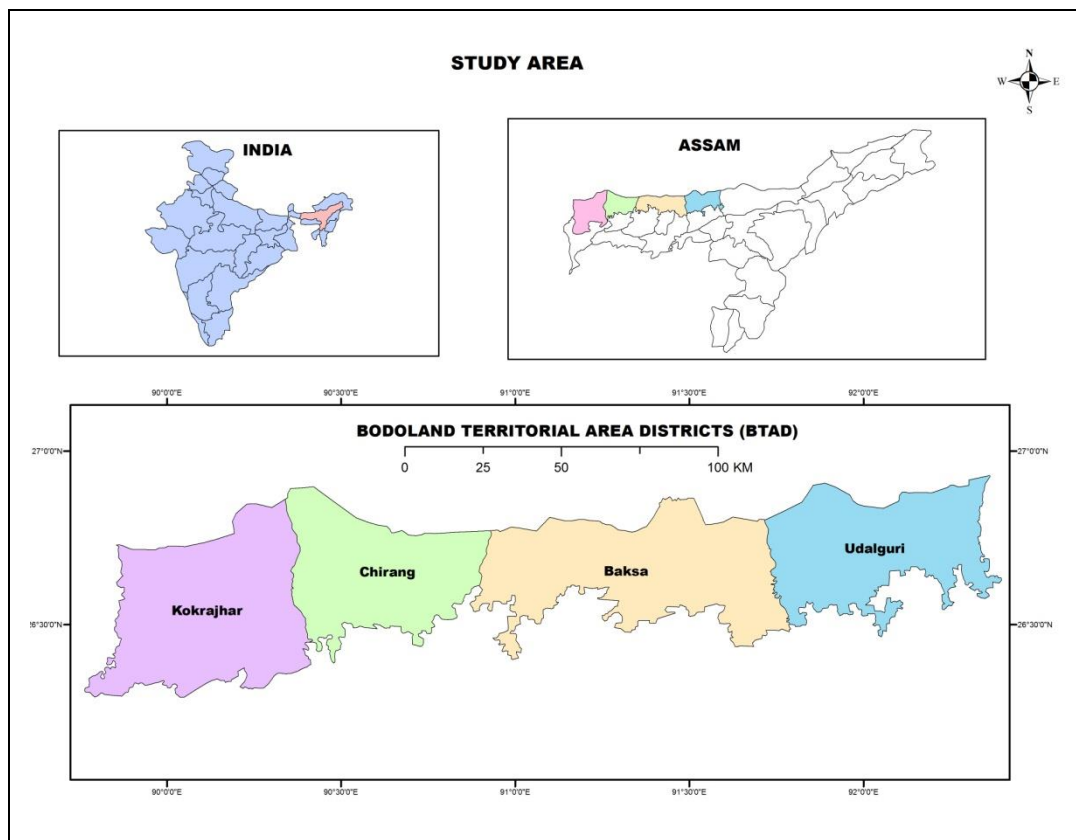


Fig 1.

Today this territorial privilege forming this autonomous council, has challenges of ensuring all round development of the region. In the midst of challenges, this region also can count on the privileges it has got. Along with the political privilege, it has got some natural privilege too, which includes the forest resource. With a forest area of about 3539.95 Sq. Km, The Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) has most of its area located along the boundary with Bhutan. The entire forest landscape along the Indo- Bhutan Boundary is almost contiguous and its biogeography has Indo- Tibetan, Indo-Malayan and Indo Gangetic influences. The Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) is situated in heavy rainfall area, because of which there is in no dearth of natural beauty, exquisite flora and fauna. The multifarious cultural groups of people with their distinct identity and picturesque cultural legacy, nurtures the wealth of cultural festivals which are

celebrated with great devotion throughout the year. All these give testimony for immense potentiality of tourism development in the region which can contribute a lot towards all round development of the region.

Ecotourism prospects in BTAD

Ecotourism concentrates on mainly natural, cultural and rural tourism. In the BTAD, the districts are among the most rural districts in entire India where industrialization is very insignificant. But nature has been benevolent towards this region with vast wealth of biodiversity of fragile rich flora and fauna which inspires the vibrant culture of the people of this place. The region has a National Park, also a UNESCO world heritage site, i.e, the Manas National Park, and two wild life sanctuaries, viz. Chakrashila wild life sanctuary and Barnadi wild life sanctuary. Also there are natural beauty spots popular as picnic

spots or reserve forests like Kalamati, Ultapani, Chowki, Deeplai beel, Kochugaon, Jamduar, Bhairavkunda, Bogamati Jalimukh along with some temples in beautiful natural settings like Mahamaya temple Sananghat temples and

Onthaigwao temple (fig 2). Besides, the rich culture and traditions including the dance and music, cuisine as well as weaving is unique and enchanting for anyone to be attracted to this place to visit.

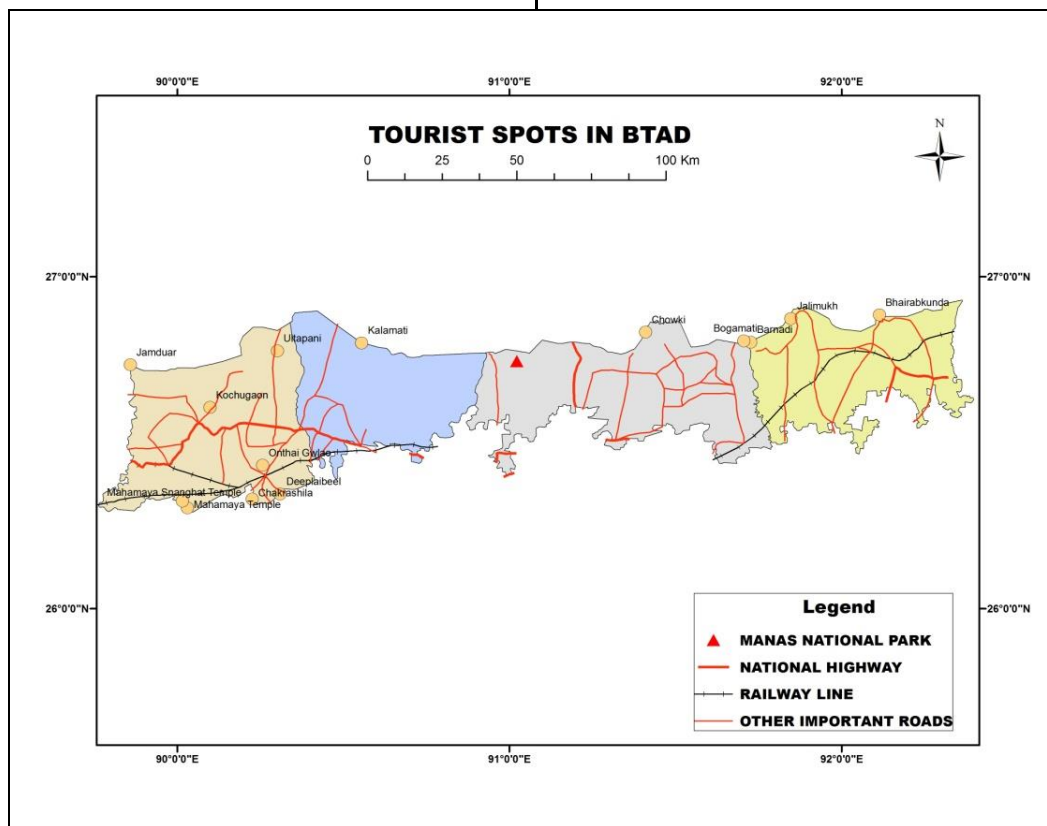


Fig. 2

Hence there is a bright scope for ecotourism to develop here. But, the region has witnessed much encroachment and destruction of the forests. Also the rural people in and around these forests are not aware of the benefits they can have by promoting and practicing ecotourism here. Under such circumstances, the question arises as to how ecotourism can be developed here to contribute to overall development of this encroachment stricken and economic development starved region.

For that, it needs to be understood that, it is very essential to know the overall scenario of the region. One must understand the perception of the tourists as well the local people in and around the potential tourists' site along with the natural and cultural resources that the tourist spot can provide. Such an understanding can provide the base from where to proceed towards the goal of tourism development in the region. Thus, as step towards this goal, a survey was conducted around different potential tourism sites in the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD). When a survey was conducted among the tourists, both domestic and foreign visiting different destinations of the Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), to understand their perception on ecotourism, it was revealed that most of the tourists prefer wildlife

tourism most of all. The survey was conducted by interviewing 62 foreigners and 120 domestic tourists. Most of the Indian tourists (53%) prefer to see the wildlife and national parks here. It's mainly because the Manas National park is the only destination of BTAD able to catch the eye of strangers (Table 1). 16% and 14% gave traditional dance forms and lifestyle of the people and flora and fauna as their 1st preference respectively. On the other hand, 9% domestic tourists preferred pilgrimage as their first preference. These tourists visited the *shaktipeeth*, Mahamaya and snanghat temple located at Bogoribari. Traditional Art and handicraft of BTAD also got the priority of only 1% domestic tourists, which may be the result of lack of exposure and lack of campaigning for such segment.

Foreign tourists mostly preferred the wildlife and flora fauna in general. In the survey, 94% gave wildlife their first preference and 6% to flora fauna in general. Thus there is a need for nature based tourism planning to attract more and more foreign tourists in BTAD. Besides the wildlife and flora and fauna the foreigners don't have any idea about other tourist resource in the region as a result of which they didn't expressed their choice for any other attractions. Hence better publicity and encouragement and development of

other tourism components like culture, weaving, local food along with adventure tourism, etc. is also

very important.

Table 1: Demand of tourists on the basis of preferences pattern

Sl. No.	Areas of interest	Number and % of tourist giving 1 st preference towards tourist attractions			
		Domestic tourist		Foreign tourists	
		No. of tourists	%	No. of tourists	%
1	Wildlife & National parks	63	53	58	94
2	Dance and lifestyle	19	16	--	--
3	Flora and fauna in General	17	14	4	6
4	Scenery and landscape	9	7	--	--
5	Art and handicraft	1	1	--	--
6	Museum	-	0	--	--
7	Native life and Culture	-	0	--	--
8	Water sports (Rafting)	-	0	--	--
9	Any other (Pilgrimage)	11	9	--	--
	Total	120	100	62	100

Source: survey conducted 2012-13

The tourists, specially the foreign tourists also showed interest and aspired to spend their stay in a local household to blend with the original environment. They are willing to experience the rural lifestyle first hand for an unforgettable and unique experience. For such a home stay facility the inclusion of local people in the tourism program is essential. Moreover ecotourism to be successful needs the participation of the local people to a significant level. When some villages in and around the national park and a wild life sanctuary were surveyed it was found that there are many villagers who are eager to earn their livelihood through tourism when given proper guidance, training and assistance. The local NGOs who are engaged in promoting conservation of the forest and tourism also want to employ the village youths by training them for different conservation and tourism related work like guiding the tourists as they know the jungle very well. Also the tourists coming to the Manas National Park staying in the resorts expressed their desire to experience the cultural dance and music as well as the cuisine of the local tribes. Taking this into consideration, the NGOs have started giving trainings to some local youths on conservation and tourists guiding.

Within the BTAD, the only national park named the Manas National park is the most popular tourist spot both among the foreign as well as domestic tourists. Besides the Chakrashila wildlife sanctuary is another attraction among the tourists but mainly among the domestic tourists. Other spots are still not much popular among the tourists. There are plans to include the North Khwmwrdwisa and Randinipara, fringe villages of Manas National Park very near the Manas Maozigendri Ecotourism Society (MMES) jungle tourist camps in Lakhibazar of Baksa district in Bodoland territorial Area Districts (BTAD), in the tourism programmes like providing homestay facility and cultural activities to entertain the tourist.

Khwmwrdwisa and Randinipara villages consist of about 80 and 60 houses respectively, out of which 45 and 37 households were surveyed. These villages lie at the vicinity of Lwkhibazar under Bhuyapara range, the entry point to the Manas National Park in the east and located towards the northern side of Pathshala.

In the 45 households of Khwmwrdwisa the population has been found to be 219 and in the 37 households of Randinipara it is 183. Both the villages are resided by people belonging to Bodo community. Among the surveyed households of Khwmwrdwisa, 100% are engaged in different agricultural activities like cultivation of rice, battle nuts, horticulture, rearing of fish and livestock. In this village, 20% households are engaged in small scale subsistence sericulture weaving and 8.9% households are engaged in tertiary activity like teaching, serving as army personals and as wage labourer.

Among the 37 surveyed households of Randinipara, 91.9% households are engaged in agricultural activities. In the form of secondary activity some are into weaving (24.3 %) of subsistence nature. Whereas in the form of tertiary activity 10.8% households are engaged in retailing activity and transport business as local cab operator. Many households are engaged in logging for fuel. Their dependence on logging has been resulted in encroachment of the forest and associated biodiversity. But this act of the people has decreased to a great extent with the implementation of conservation programs and education among the villagers.

In Khwmwrdwisa village, landholdings among the households are mostly less than 1 hectare. The villagers mostly have small and fragmented landholdings and consequently low level of agricultural production. Most of the households revealed their monthly income to be

less than rupees 5000/- at an average in both the villages only a few households, where there are more than one earning member in the family, the monthly income in such family is more than Rs10000/-.

Thus economic condition of the households in both the villages thus doesn't seem to be sound. They are mostly primary workers and far away from any big town or city. Employment opportunity is limited and hence ecotourism/village tourism has been looked upon as possible alternative.

When they were asked about the willingness to entertain the tourist/ guest or be part of the tourism programs, many households in both the villages showed enthusiasm (Table 2). Among

the households 62.2% in Khwmwrdwisa and 56.7% in Randinipara showed interest in providing food and lodging (home-stay) to the tourists whereas 24.4% households in Khwmwrdwisa village and 29.7% households in Randinipara village showed interest in showcasing the traditional folk dance and music to the guest. Apart from it 24.4% households in Khwmwrdwisa and 29.7% households in Randinipara village expressed their willingness to provide both home-stay with food and lodging and also cultural aspects including traditional dance and music to the guests. Whereas, 13.3% households in Khwmwrdwisa and 13.5% in Randinipara didn't responded to this aspect and showed little interest. But overall most of the villagers were willing to participate in any such tourism program and be a significant stakeholder.

Table 2: Locals interest in tourism programs

Interest in tourism activities	Number of households in Khwmwrdwisa	%	Number of households in Randinipara	%
Providing food and lodging	28	62.2	21	56.7
Showcase culture like dance and music	11	24.4	11	29.7
Both	11	24.4	11	29.7
No response (not interested)	6	13.3	5	13.5
Total surveyed household	45	100	37	100

Source: household survey, 2011

In another part of Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD), towards its south in the district of Kokrajhar, there is a wildlife sanctuary called Chakrashila. There are some villages like, Choraikhola, Harinaguri, Daukibari, Dhamodarpur and Bhalukjhora in and around Chakrashila, where also village survey was carried out. The villages of Choraikhola are located towards north and north-west of the Chakrashila wildlife sanctuary and Harainaguri lies to the north-west of the Baukhungri hill of Chakrashila. On the other hand Bhalukjhora lies to the north-west of Chakrashila and Daukibari and Damodarpur village lies to the north and north-east of the Deeplai *beel* lying to the south of Chakrashila, which form the southern boundary of the sanctuary.

These villages do not have any household engaged in any eco tourism program nor there do any plan so far to engage them in any such programe. But their location and setup seem conducive for such a program as the villages are very near the wildlife sanctuary and in the lap of nature. The villagers direct participation can enhance their economic condition as well as develop ecotourism in this region. Although there is no tourism program Participation by the households but they showed some interest to participate in tourism programs like providing hospitality, fooding and lodging to the tourist or cultural showcase when funded by the authority or an institution,

A sample of 30 households from each of the five villages have been considered among the total 184 people of Choraikhola, 203 of

Harainaguri, 161 of Daukibari, 189 of Damodarpur and 185 of Bhalukjhora.

Both in Choraikhola and Harainaguri village most of the households belonged to Boro and Rabha tribes. Among the sample households of Choraikhola, 12 were Bodo, 12 Rabha. The remaining 8 households were of people belonging to other communities like Tea tribes, Garo, Rajbonshi, etc. In Harainaguri village, 19 Bodo households are incorporated, followed by 7 Rabha households and the remaining consisted of Rajbonshi community.

The household samples of Daukibari, Damodarpur and Bhalukjhora village are represented by Bodo tribes along with Rabha, Rajbonshi, Tea tribes. In Daukibari, sample village household, there are 16 Bodo households, 12 Garo and the rest consist of 2 tea tribe households. In Damodarpur, 14 Bodo households, 8 Garo households, 8 tea tribe household are taken as sample and in Bhalukjhora, 25 Bodo households and 5 Garo households are taken.

Educational qualification of the villagers, at an average in all the five villagers is very low with large number of illiterate villagers. The highest qualification is graduation attained by a very few in all the five villages

Most of the households in all the 5 villages are engaged in agriculture. In all, the 83% households of Choraikhola and 100% households of Harainaguri, Daukibari, Damodarpur and Bhalukjhora are engaged in primary activity which

is mainly rice cultivation, livestock rearing, dairying, etc. In the villages of Daukibari and Damodarpur which lie besides the Deeplai Beel, fishing and banana planting is largely practiced.

In Choraikhola, 30% households, in Harainaguri 27% and in Bhalukjhora 23% households are engaged in secondary activities like weaving in subsistence nature or as wage labour. Apart from it 37% households in Harainaguri, 40% in Choraikhola, 17% in Daukibari, 13% in Damodarpur and 17% households in Bhalukjhora are engaged in tertiary activities like teaching, retailing and private cab transport service provider, etc. It was found that in Choraikhola and Harainaguri have more tertiary workers than the other three villages these tertiary workers engage a teachers, cab drivers and retailers. In Harainaguri, among the 37% people engaged in tertiary activities, few of them were found to be engaged by forest department as temporary guides for the tourists visiting Chakrashila. The other three villages included some hawkers who sell small eatery stuffs, fruits and drinks to the visitors in the Deeplai beel.

The monthly income among the people is not found to be very high in all the five villages.

However, most of them earn below Rs. 5000/- per month. There are some households that have more than one earning member. In such households the monthly income seemed to be Rs.10000 /- and above.

The landholding of the villagers ranges from less than 1 hectare to around 2 hectares. Most of the households fall within the category of less than 1 hectare landholdings.

The villagers in all these five villages need to be made aware about possibilities of cultural tourism that can be beneficial to enhance their economy and conservation and management of the green natural surroundings. When asked in terms of their participation towards such tourism programme, many showed enthusiasm (Table 3, Table 4.) Among them 17% households in Harainaguri, Choraikhola, Daukibari, Damodarpur and 20% households in Bhalukjhora have shown interest in providing both the food, lodging and cultural showcase through dance and music. However, due to lack of awareness and education among these villages, many failed to acknowledge this idea of tourism and didn't express any view on this in spite of having the valuable tourism resources with them.

Table 3: Interest in tourism programs among the households of Harainaguri and Choraikhola

Interest in tourism activities	Number of households in Harainaguri	%	Number of households in Choraikhola	%
Providing fooding and lodging	5	17	4	13
Showcase culture like dance and music	11	37	8	27
Both	5	17	5	17
No response (not interested)	14	47	18	60
No. of household surveyed	30	100	30	100

Source: household survey, 2012-13

Table 4: Interest in tourism programs among the households of Daokibari, Damodarpur and Bhalukjhora village

Interest in tourism activities	Number of households in Daukibari	%	Number of households in Damodarpur	%	Number of households in Bhalukjhora	%
Providing food and lodging	9	30	8	27	8	27
Showcase culture like dance and music	9	30	9	30	11	37
Both	5	17	5	17	6	20
No response (not interested)	12	40	13	43	12	40
No. of household surveyed	30	100	30	100	30	100

Source: household survey, 2012-13

Tourism can be act as a stepping stone towards sustainable development of a place. However, to make tourism programme successful requires there lays the need of active involvement of the local people, who are the bearer of native life and culture. Though, tourism concept is still not

popular among the rural people in BTAD, the village survey in this regard reflected a gradually growing ground for to tourism development with the active support of a few NGOs. But their location and situation in the vicinity of the very high and high potential sites of BTAD seem

conducive for such a program. The village folk showed some interest to participate in tourism programs like providing hospitality, food facility and lodging to the tourist or in showcasing cultural when supported by the concerned government tourism administration or private tourism organization. Such a positive step can provide locals a meaningful supplementary support system, both socially and economically make them economically sustainable and benefit the entire society by bringing peace and prosperity.

Challenges and suggestions:

Thus what can be made out from such examples of finding is that such village household at the vicinity of the National park and wildlife sanctuaries can be well organized and trained by several NGOs or government tourism department by going upto them. If required, experts from outside the region or state can be invited for this purpose. There are provisions for some local guides provided by the forest and tourism department of the BTC, which is on a very insignificant level. The guides are among the local village youths in a very non professional way and due to very temporary nature with irregular fund and insecure nature of the job, many of them leave the job or are not regular. These should be taken into consideration with their proper training on professional lines and job security. The villages should organize a cultural dance and music team to showcase their art and culture to the visiting tourists. And some selected households should be made part of the homestay facility for the tourists. Those households engaged in weaving or sericulture should be encouraged and aided by the concerned authority and organizations with provision for threads and markets and encourage them to weave at larger scale. The very fact that the tourists all the way comes to visit and experience their weaving talent and produce ultimately, raise the confidence of the weavers.

The region already is fortunate enough to have several rare and endangered species found here. The National parks and wildlife sanctuaries here are thus of great interest to the tourists where they can get the chance to see many

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endangered and endemic species of the world. Besides the beauty of fast flowing streams the Bhutan hills make the scenery. These fast flowing streams originating in the Bhutan hills can be of great adventure tourism scope with facilities like river rafting. Being not so professionally developed tourist spot the region lacks infrastructure facilities like hotels and resorts. Thus home stay facility, when provided not only satisfies the tourists' desire to experience the rural culture first hand but also solves the problem of dearth of stay facility. Such a natural beauty with rich flora and fauna together with the rural as well as cultural tourism makes the entire ecotourism a success with sustainability.

Today tourism has become a very important business with several countries having their entire economy dependent on it. Their tourism is designed as suitable to their culture and economy. But in a country like India where more than 60% population is rural, tourism should be planned in such a way that it also includes the local rural people so that tourism becomes meaningful and sustainable.

Conclusions

The Bodoland Territorial Area Districts (BTAD) has a rich and vibrant nature inspired culture of the people, where 95.5% population is rural, has every potentiality for development of ecotourism. To refine the potentiality and develop eco tourism, one must have an in depth knowledge about the situation around, understand the needs and aspiration of the tourists as well as the local people (host), what the region can supply or provide to the tourists and accordingly plan strategies to develop ecotourism in the region. Tourism brings about interaction between the visiting tourist and the host people. This exchange and understanding of culture can eradicate a lot of misconceptions in the mind of both sides thus contributing to peace. Ecotourism in the region, thus bring avenues for employment in this unemployment stricken region and bring all round economic development in the region along with conservation of the environment and thus putting a step forward to create a better world.